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MODESTY, PRIDE AND REALISTIC SELF-ASSESSMENT

BY DANIEL STATMAN

An interesting development in contemporary moral philosophy is the renewal of interest in the subject of virtues, a development which seems to flow, at least partially, from the apparent dissatisfaction with 'Modern Moral Philosophy',¹ and with modern ethical theories.² Discussions in this area can be divided roughly into two categories: the first focuses on general questions concerning the nature of the virtues, their place in ethical theory and the advantages and weaknesses of virtue ethics; the second takes as its object some particular virtue, analyses it and attempts to explain its moral importance. These two levels of discussion naturally overlap and influence each other. My present paper belongs to the second category, and the virtue I seek to analyse here is one which has been quite neglected until recently: namely, the virtue of modesty.

Though the title of my paper speaks of modesty, my argument applies to the virtue of humility too. There are some differences in the use of these two concepts (for example, while one can be modest in one's way of dressing, one cannot analogously be said to be humble), but I believe that they are relatively minor, and that essentially modesty and humility share the same basic features. Indeed, the same fundamental problems concerning their nature were discussed recently by Norvin Richards³ under the title of humility, and by Julia Driver,⁴ followed by Owen Flanagan,⁵ under the title of modesty.⁶ Thus, in most of my paper, I shall use these two terms interchangeably, though the account I suggest towards the end of it fits better that of modesty.⁷

¹ See Anscombe's celebrated paper in her *Ethics, Religion and Politics: Collected Philosophical Papers*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), Vol. III, Chapter 4.

² See e.g. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985).

³ 'Is Humility a Virtue?', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1988), pp. 253–9.

⁴ 'The Virtues of Ignorance', *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989), pp. 373–84.

⁵ 'Virtue and Ignorance', *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), pp. 420–8.

⁶ See also Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, 'The Virtue of Modesty', *American Philosophical Quarterly* (forthcoming).

⁷ Since the term 'modesty' carries connotations of sexual modesty usually associated

Each of these three writers offers an analysis of modesty and of its ethical justification. Since Richards's and Flanagan's theses are quite similar, we are really faced with only two rival suggestions. In section I, I present these two theses and try to show why both of them fail. In section II, I argue that for Richards and Flanagan's view to be intelligible, a religious background must be presupposed. In the last section, I suggest an interpretation of modesty which is different from the above interpretations and which does not rely on a religious context.⁸

I

Walter Schaller has recently rejected what he calls the 'Standard View' of the connection between virtues and duties, according to which all virtues are merely dispositions to obey moral rules, that is, to perform or omit certain actions.⁹ According to Schaller, the picture is more complex: some virtues do, indeed, fit this standard view, while others, notably beneficence, gratitude and self-respect, do not. The moral worth of these last virtues lies in the agent's having certain beliefs and a certain attitude towards himself or towards others, and not only in a disposition to carry out certain actions. To be sure, the virtue of self-respect, for instance, leads one naturally to a certain pattern of behaviour. However, the moral worth of self-respect does not lie in this external behaviour but in the agent's beliefs, attitudes and reasons for it. The Deferential Wife, to use Thomas Hill's famous example,¹⁰ is servile and morally condemnable, not because of what she does, but rather because of the reasons that motivate her, 'because of the beliefs and attitudes she has about her own moral rights, worth and status'.¹¹

Schaller's distinction is a good starting point for our enquiry since it seems generally accepted that humility belongs in the same category as gratitude and self-respect, that is, it consists mainly of certain beliefs

with women, and since I do not refer at all to this meaning of modesty, in order to prevent misunderstanding, I shall conduct my discussion using the masculine pronoun. This in no way expresses any prejudice; if modesty is one of the human virtues, it is no doubt to be found in both men and women.

⁸ Unfortunately, I saw Ben-Ze'ev's paper only after my own essay had already been completed, and thus I could not give his paper the attention it deserves. Ben-Ze'ev rejects Driver's account of modesty, and offers an account of modesty which, in spite of important differences, is interestingly close to mine.

⁹ 'Are Virtues No More Than Dispositions to Obey Moral Rules?', *Philosophia* (Israel) 20 (1990), pp. 195–208.

¹⁰ 'Servility and Moral Respect', *The Monist* 57 (1973), pp. 87–104, mentioned by Schaller, 'Are Virtues No More Than Dispositions?', pp. 202–3.

¹¹ Schaller, *ibid.*, p. 202.

and attitudes rather than in a sort of behaviour.¹² Julia Driver has argued for this point at some length, rejecting what she calls ‘the behavioral account’ of modesty, and showing that one might be immodest without displaying any immodest behaviour (such as bragging).¹³ Humility is close to self-respect, both being self-regarding virtues and both irreducible to dispositions to perform certain actions. Granted these assumptions, the following condition for humility can be formulated:

- (1) A necessary condition for an agent A being humble is for him to have a certain sort of self-assessment, lower than he would have had otherwise.

According to Driver, humility implies unconscious under-estimation of one’s value, that is, a mistaken self-assessment. A person is humble, or modest, when he is ignorant of his real worth, when he sincerely – but wrongly – believes that his great achievements are nothing special. Driver argues that the virtue of modesty, as well as that of blind charity, serve as counter-examples to the Aristotelian principle that ‘no virtue is constituted by, or based upon, ignorance’. In contrast to this principle, humility is a virtue of a kind which necessarily involves ignorance, ignorance as to one’s real desert. Driver says that ‘[a] truly modest person would simply not believe that he was that good’. In a way, modesty can be characterized as ‘a dogmatic disposition to under-estimation of self-worth’ (p. 378). So, according to Driver:

- (1D) A necessary condition for an agent A being humble is for him to have a wrong self-assessment, under-estimating his real value.¹⁴

I believe this account should be rejected, and I shall present my reasons immediately; but before doing so, it might be helpful to clarify the nature of my criticism. I do not wish to cast doubt upon the fact that

¹² I do not wish to argue that beliefs are the only features that are relevant to analysing humility. Surely, other features ought to be discussed too, features such as sensations, wants and wishes. See Gabriele Taylor, *Pride, Shame and Guilt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 1–2. However, my primary concern at this stage is to explore the *beliefs* which underlie humility, i.e. the cognitive aspect of humility.

¹³ Driver, ‘The Virtues of Ignorance’, pp. 375–6.

¹⁴ Anscombe ascribes a similar view to Sidgwick, arguing that ‘he thinks that humility consists in under-estimating your own merits – i.e. in a species of untruthfulness’ (Anscombe, *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, p. 34). For a different interpretation of Sidgwick, see J. Wardle, ‘Miss Anscombe on Sidgwick’s View of Humility’, *Philosophy* 58 (1983), pp. 389–91.

some people do use the term 'modesty' in a way which accords with (ID), and praise people who are ignorant of their value (especially when their value is high). Still, I shall argue, this conception of modesty is wrong. My criticism is essentially ethical, not linguistic: that is, I argue that (ID) is inconsistent with some important ethical beliefs which we hold to be true. They are as follows.

(a) *The moral status of ignorance and self-deception.* It is often believed, especially in the Aristotelian tradition, that ignorance is some kind of a weakness or a defect. However, even if not a defect, it is very hard to accept the idea that ignorance is an essential constituent of a *virtue*, that a certain kind of a 'dogmatic disposition' (Driver, p. 378) is something praiseworthy.¹⁵ It is one thing to tolerate ignorance and quite another to praise it. This point is more evident with regard to self-deception. According to Driver, 'it may be that to cultivate these virtues [of ignorance] one would need to practice self-deception' (p. 382). But how could a disposition based on self-deception be considered a virtue? It is true that one very rarely deliberately chooses to be ignorant, or to practise self-deception, so, in a sense, one is usually not to blame for having such features. Yet, once again, how can they be considered as virtues?¹⁶

(b) *The voluntariness of the virtues.* According to Driver, 'since modesty involves ignorance, it is also necessarily involuntary in nature' (p. 381). Since, as a general rule, people do not want to be ignorant, their being ignorant about their worth, that is, their being modest, is involuntary.¹⁷ However, this account runs counter to a basic moral intuition, according to which virtues are such features that are – at least, in principle and to a limited extent – within the control of human beings. It is hard to accept the idea that there is no way one can deliberately bring oneself to be modest. Surely one cannot consciously form false beliefs about oneself.¹⁸

¹⁵ See Flanagan, 'Virtue and Ignorance', p. 425; Richards, 'Is Humility a Virtue?', p. 253.

¹⁶ To this Driver might answer that no contradiction exists between the fact that some characteristic x is not a virtue, or is even a defect, and the fact that it is a necessary condition to some virtue. The whole unit created by x and other components might be valuable, as Moore argued many years ago, though x has no value in itself, or has negative value. However, the more important and central the relevant condition is, the less this argument seems to convince. Since, according to Driver, ignorance or self-deception are very essential constituents of modesty, it is hard to accept the idea that their moral defects do not affect the moral value of modesty.

¹⁷ Nevertheless, I believe that *non-voluntary* would be more fitting here. The *involuntariness* is about one's ignorance and not about one's modesty. In other words, though it is true that one does not want to be ignorant, it is not similarly true that one does not want to be modest. The fact that p is a necessary condition to q does not entail that if one does not want p , one does not want q either.

¹⁸ Elsewhere I have argued that, in Driver's view, being modest would be an

(c) My last point against Driver concerns her explanation for why we value modesty. While Driver argues that modesty has morally desirable consequences, I believe there are reasons to fear the contrary, to fear that modesty might lead to *undesirable* results. According to Driver, ‘the modest person fails to elicit the sort of jealousy that a nonmodest person would engender’, and is, therefore, ‘less troublesome’ (p. 384). I am not sure about the relation between modesty and envy, but it seems to me much more complicated than Driver suggests. Consider the following counter-argument to that of Driver: *Ex hypothesi*, the modest person does not consciously under-estimate his value, but sincerely believes that he is not worth much and that he is very much inferior to other persons. This misconceived image of the self is liable to make the agent envious; he is liable to envy those admirable features which he finds in others, but which he fails to see in himself. Thus, non-voluntary under-estimation seems to foster envy and not reduce it. If anything, it is pride (in a certain interpretation), not modesty, that might help to decrease the amount of envy in the world. According to Richard Taylor, the proud man is not so much concerned with what others think of him, but with what he thinks of himself.¹⁹ He is not busy comparing himself with others and checking his neighbour’s grass. He is (rightly) content with what he has achieved, and thus, is far from jealousy and envy.

Humility, as Driver describes it, seems to harbour another possible danger. If one believes one is worth less than one really is worth, one might conclude that one deserves less than one really does deserve, and as a result, one might be willing to give up things that one should, by no means, give up. Particularly, there is a danger of tending towards some kind of servility, giving up one’s legitimate moral rights on the basis of the feeling that one is so inferior that one cannot have demands towards other human beings. This danger – if, indeed, it is a real one – results from the element of ignorance which, according to Driver, is essential to humility. If one is ignorant with respect to one’s beauty, intelligence and professional success, one might just as well be ignorant with respect to one’s moral status. A mistaken low self-assessment might lead to a lack of the appropriate self-esteem.

These difficulties, notably the first one, have led Owen Flanagan and Norvin Richards – independently – to formulate a different view of humility. Their thesis is that humility consists of having an accurate and realistic self-assessment. Humility is the opposite of under-

interesting case of (good) moral luck, which is based on a sort of (bad) epistemic luck. See my ‘Moral and Epistemic Luck’, *Ratio* 4 (1991), p. 154, note 11.

¹⁹ *Ethics, Faith and Reason* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985), pp. 102–3.

estimation as well as of over-estimation, and involves true belief about one's worth. At first glance, this might seem odd, since merely possessing accurate belief about one's worth does not seem to merit the high value which is usually assigned to humility. After all, what is so special and morally worthy about having true beliefs in general, or a true belief about one's value in particular? The answer lies in a further assumption emphasized by Flanagan and based on empirical research: namely, that human beings naturally tend to *over-estimate* their value.²⁰ If this is granted, then accurate self-appraisal indeed seems to be something praiseworthy. Thus, Richards and Flanagan would formulate condition (1) as follows:

- (1RF) A necessary condition for an agent A being humble is for him to have an accurate self-assessment, in particular for him not to over-estimate his real value.²¹

However, this condition raises a different problem, which seems to undermine the very possibility of humility. The problem starts with the assumption that humility is especially praised in people who are of high merit and of outstanding character. We admire the fact that although someone is such a successful and a worthy person, he is nevertheless modest. In Michael Slote's terminology, humility is a 'dependent virtue', that is, 'a quality whose status as a virtue in a given person depends on whether that person has various other virtues'.²² Only within people with admirable virtues and excellences does humility count as an (additional) virtue. This entails that, necessarily, if one has the virtue of humility, one is a highly admirable person.²³ A weaker formulation will suffice for my argument, to the effect that it is at least possible that one is both modest and also of high merit.

However, if, as (1RF) assumes, the humble person *knows* his merit, and if his merit is high, how can he still be humble? The fundamental dilemma concerning the virtue of modesty can now be formulated:

²⁰ See Flanagan, 'Virtue and Ignorance', pp. 426–7. Man's tendency to over-estimate his value was noted by Hume in his 'Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals', in *The Philosophical Papers of David Hume*, ed. T.H. Grenn and T.H. Grose (Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1964), Vol. 4, p. 241. See also P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), who argues that humility is required 'only because men tend to think too well of themselves' (p. 9).

²¹ This view seems to be shared by G. Taylor too. According to Taylor, the humble man is the man 'who accepts his lowly position as what is due to him' (*Pride, Shame and Guilt*, p. 17). The fact that he occupies a low position is an objective fact, independent of what he thinks about it. What makes him humble is his acknowledgement and acceptance of this position.

²² M. Slote, *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 62.

²³ See Slote, *ibid.*, p. 64.

1. It is possible that there exists a person P who is genuinely admirable and worthy, as well as modest.
2. Necessarily, either P knows he is genuinely worthy, or he does not.
3. If P knows he is worthy, he cannot be modest, since his worth is exceptionally high.
4. If P is ignorant of his value, his alleged modesty cannot be considered a virtue.

Since these four premises generate an evident paradox, one might suggest we give up our first premise, replacing it by:

5. No person could be both genuinely worthy and modest.

However, this seems highly counter-intuitive and implausible.

Both Richards and Flanagan try to answer this problem, the former putting it at the centre of his paper. They both offer a similar solution, though it is developed in a more explicit way by Richards. According to this solution, the truly worthy person might none the less be modest, since 'he keeps his accomplishments in perspective' (Richards, p. 256). This is not easy, because such a person is stimulated to exaggerate his qualities beyond the right perspective. The modest person is virtuous in that he succeeds in resisting this temptation and not over-estimating his worth.

What is the status of this requirement to 'keep [one's] accomplishments in perspective'? Is it another separate condition, in addition to (1RF), or is it merely another way of stating (1RF)? The last possibility seems more promising. Keeping one's accomplishments in perspective means having an accurate self-assessment, while letting them grow out of perspective means that, to some extent, one has lost one's grip on reality and has mistaken beliefs about one's worth. Thus the requirement to keep things in perspective is an explication of the requirement to have an accurate self-assessment. Now the point that Flanagan and Richards are trying to make is that keeping things in perspective when reflecting on one's personal merit leads to a *lower, but a more valid*, self-assessment. The worthy and modest person has a realistic appreciation of his noble accomplishments but still takes them in perspective and, thus, does not have too high an opinion of himself.²⁴

²⁴ It would seem that (1RF) is not only a necessary condition for humility but also a

However, I doubt whether this solution to the above paradox works. I ask the reader to contemplate some great person, either an historical figure such as Socrates, Gandhi or others, or any less famous person, by whom the reader has been especially impressed. When I say a great person, I do not mean a *perfect* one – surely nobody, except God, is perfect. Rather, I mean a human being who has many of the virtues that, in the reader's view, determine personal merit; a person who is pleasant, benevolent, clever, sensitive, good-looking, brave, assertive, a good father, etc; a person who is blessed with many natural qualities, and who has also achieved striking gains thanks to his will-power, courage and hard work. Now what exactly would it mean for such a person to keep his qualities and achievements 'in perspective'? *Whose* perspective? From the perspective of all ordinary people this person is an extraordinary character; and, indeed, he *is*. Yet maybe the required perspective is not that of the ordinary man, but that of the extraordinary: for example, maybe one should compare one's talents and accomplishments as a philosopher not with those of one's contemporary colleagues, but with those of Plato and Hume. And when one takes *that* perspective, one's self-appraisal necessarily – and justifiably – decreases. One understands that one's accomplishments are really nothing special in comparison to those of some other people, and thus one becomes modest.

Unfortunately, this line of argument, too, ought to be rejected. The fact that one can always be a better person in one or another respect does not rule out the possibility that one's achievements might be truly impressive. Suppose human worth could be measured on a quantitative scale. And suppose one has gained 90 points out of 100. Why do we consider that the right perspective is to stress the ten missing points which hardly anyone has ever gained, and not the 90 which one actually gained while the human average is only 60? Let us concentrate on Plato and Hume themselves. What would be *their* right perspective? Hume was a very important and influential philosopher and also, in the view of some of his contemporaries, a very remarkable human being. Adam Smith said that he always considered Hume 'as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the

sufficient one. Having an accurate self-assessment, that is, knowing how to keep one's accomplishments in perspective, is sufficient for being a modest person. In contrast, (1D) is only a necessary condition, since mere under-estimation of one's value is to be found in people suffering from an inferiority complex, people who are not (certainly not necessarily) modest. Thus Driver would have to point out some other necessary conditions for modesty that will enable us to distinguish between people whose under-estimation is a sign of their possessing the virtue of modesty, and those whose under-estimation is a manifestation of an inferiority complex.

nature of human frailty will admit'. According to Flanagan and Richards, in order for such a man to be modest, he would have had to keep his achievements in perspective. But if Hume was indeed such a special person, and if he was not ignorant of his worth, what perspective could, or should, have made him modest? Needless to say, my argument does not rely on the particular character of David Hume²⁵ or of any other historical figure. All I need to be granted for the sake of my argument is premise (1) above, that is, the *possibility* of a human being who is genuinely exceptional in his character, achievements and wisdom, who has reached the highest (or one of the highest) possible peaks of human perfection. How could this possibility be denied? And what would it mean for such a person to see himself and his achievements 'in perspective'?

The same difficulty can be shown by looking at one of the main advantages of humility according to Richards: that is, its conducing 'to a virtuous spirit of forgiveness' (p. 258). Since the humble person recognizes accurately not only his virtues and successes, but also his faults and errors, he tends to be tolerant towards the faults of other people and tends to forgive their wrong behaviour. Viewing himself as 'only human' brings the humble person to view other persons similarly, and, as a result, be more ready to forgive them. By way of contrast, the person who over-estimates his value is blind to his own defects and thus finds it hard to show tolerance and to grant forgiveness for the defects of others. However, granted that no human being is perfect, there still seems to be a significant difference between those excellent people who err only in minor ways, and not very often, and most people who err and fail in major ways, almost daily. How, then, can our excellent person who has very minor and insignificant faults be tolerant of those whose faults are often so significant and prominent? It is interesting to note in this context that some philosophers indeed argue that the excellent person is not 'merely human' but is almost divine,²⁶ and from such an elevated viewpoint, contempt, rather than tolerance and forgiveness, seems to be a far more appropriate attitude towards the 'masses'.

If I am right in these last points, then 'keeping in perspective' is sometimes merely a new form of self-deception. One allows some minor

²⁵ Maybe Hume is not a very good example, if one takes into account the opinion of other people, such as Samuel Johnson, James Boswell and others.

²⁶ See *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 10, Chapter 7, regarding the man who fulfils the contemplative ideal, and David Hume, 'Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals', Section II, regarding the person who is blessed with the virtue of benevolence as well as with other virtues. These qualities, argues Hume, 'seem even to raise the possessors of them above the rank of *human nature* and make them approach in some measure to the divine' (p. 174).

failure or defect to conceal one's virtuous character and excellent achievements when making an assessment of one's worth. One persuades oneself that there is nothing special in gaining 90 points of human worth out of 100 while in fact this is a very outstanding and praiseworthy achievement, since most people reach only 60. Or, one views one's shortcomings as on the same level as those of others, while in fact one's own are very minor and insignificant by comparison with theirs. Thus, we seem to be forced back to Driver, to the view that humility necessarily involves ignorance and self-deception. But the weaknesses of this view have already been explored.

My approach, I admit, is influenced by Aristotle's celebrated discussion of the great-souled man in the fourth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. According to Aristotle, the great-souled man is one who, justifiably, has a high opinion of himself and who expects others to acknowledge his worth and grant him the appropriate honours. If one gives up the goods and honours one is entitled to, one must be either a fool or of a hesitant and weak character. The excellent person should not fail to appreciate his worth nor to demand similar appreciation from others. *This*, according to Aristotle, would be the meaning of keeping things in the right perspective.²⁷

II

If one wishes to keep condition (1RF) and still leave room for humility, it seems that another condition must be added concerning human value, namely:

- (2) Ultimately, human value is pretty low.

If this pessimistic approach is adopted, it is understandable how an accurate self-assessment can, or should, lead to humility. Such a view of human nature is historically connected in Western civilization with the Jewish and Christian religious traditions, through which the virtue of humility entered Western civilization. I shall try to elaborate on this point.

The central importance of humility in the Jewish-Christian tradition is evident in many religious sources, from the time of the Old Testament and the New Testament until contemporary theology. For example: 'For though the Lord be high, yet regardeth He the lowly,

²⁷ On Aristotle's *megalopsychia*, see N. Cooper, 'Aristotle's Crowning Virtue', *Apeiron* 22 (1989), pp. 191–205.

and the haughty He knoweth from afar' (Psalms 138:6); 'Blest are the lowly, they shall inherit the Land' (Matthew 5:5). Praise of humility is accompanied by a denunciation of pride: 'A man's pride shall bring him low, but honour shall uphold the humble in spirit' (Proverbs 29:23); 'Let not the foot of pride come against me, and let not the hand of the wicked remove me' (Psalms 36:12).

This attitude towards humility and pride flows naturally from religion's most basic tenet, the demand to worship God. Worship presumes the superior status of the one worshipped, on the one hand, and the inferiority of the worshipper, on the other. This asymmetrical relation explains the centrality of humility in almost every religious frame of thought:

This is why humility is *necessary* on the part of the worshipper. The role to which he commits himself is that of the humble servant, 'not worthy to touch the hem of His garment'. Compared to God's gloriness, 'all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags' (Isaiah 64:6). So, in committing oneself to this role, one is acknowledging God's greatness and one's own relative worthlessness. This humble attitude is not a mere embellishment of the ritual: on the contrary, worship, unlike love or respect, *requires* humility. Pride is a sin, and pride before God is incompatible with worshipping him.²⁸

I said that the endorsement of humility is connected with the 'pessimistic' view of human nature which is to be found in religious thought. I mean that from a religious standpoint, the believer cannot see himself as more than 'dust and ashes' (Genesis 28:27) when he compares himself with the glory of God. One cannot truly believe in God without understanding one's lowliness in relation to Him.²⁹ According to Rudolf Otto, this self-consciousness is an essential element of the 'numinous'. 'It is', he says, 'the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures.'³⁰ Hence, 'keeping things in perspective', from a religious point of view, would be understanding how low human worth is in comparison with God's greatness. It would mean grasping

²⁸ J. Rachels, 'God and Human Attitudes', in P. Helm (ed.) *Divine Commands and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 41.

²⁹ See Jay Newman, 'Humility and Self-Realization', *Journal of Value Inquiry* 16 (1982), p. 283.

³⁰ R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. by J. W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 10.

the fact that even the worthiest man, a man such as Abraham, is really only 'dust and ashes'. And the point I am trying to make is that from the above point of view, this estimation would be the most accurate apprehension of one's worth – in accord with the requirement posed by (1RF).

Gabriele Taylor notes that since pride and humility refer (respectively) to one's high or low position, they presuppose a system by reference to which high and low positions can be defined. The most obvious example of such a system, in Taylor's view, is that of a hierarchical social system, like the feudal system of the Middle Ages. My own analysis suggests a different hierarchical system, that of the entire universe. Only within this large system can all human beings, even the most worthy and admirable, be said to occupy a lowly position, with the effect that being humble expresses one's accurate self-assessment.³¹

It might be helpful to try and sum up the argument up to this point:

1. Humility involves either ignorance of one's worth, or being acquainted with it. Since neither ignorance, nor self-deception, can serve as a basis for virtue, I suggested, *contra* Driver, that we adopt the second option.
2. However, an accurate self-assessment could lead to humility only if true understanding of human nature would show it to be weak, fragile and imperfect. Such an understanding is essential to the Jewish and Christian tradition.³²
3. Therefore, the virtue of humility is most intelligible within a religious frame of thought.

One corollary of this argument is an objection to a certain methodological assumption of Richards. Richards argues that any theory of human worth goes beyond the *analysis* of humility, an analysis which is supposed to be neutral among different and rival theories of human worth (Richards, p. 256). I find this misleading. As I have tried to show, Richards's analysis fits more coherently religious theories of human value, or 'pessimistic' theories of human value in general.

³¹ On man's low position when viewed from his position in the entire universe, see Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed*, trans. by Shlomo Pines (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1963), Part 3, Chapter 13.

³² Needless to say, there are many important differences between Judaism and Christianity here as well as between different groups within these two religions.

The above conclusion accords well with the view developed by Richard Taylor in his *Ethics, Faith and Reasons*.³³ Taylor argues that the central concepts of modern ethics have their origin in a religious tradition which is no longer held by most modern societies. This means that both laymen and philosophers are using concepts which have been detached from the cultural context that gave them meaning. The result is ‘that philosophers, with the exception of those who take religion very seriously, are apt to talk nonsense the moment they address themselves to questions of ethics’ (p. 2). In contrast, ethics before the era of religion, notably the ethics of the ancient Greeks, was intelligible and coherent. Thus, it should not surprise us that concepts which were so intimately connected with religious beliefs cannot be accounted for in any reasonable way, once these beliefs are ignored or rejected. Often, such concepts should simply be jettisoned.

One of these concepts, according to Taylor, is that of humility. In ancient lists of virtues, humility is not to be found, simply because it was not considered a virtue. If anything, it was considered a vice, an expression of either ignorance or weakness.³⁴ Humility captures its place as a virtue only after Christianity spreads and succeeds in changing (Taylor: distorting) man’s moral viewpoint.³⁵

My analysis supports and reinforces that of Taylor. Driver’s paper, as well as the papers of Flanagan and Richards, can now be seen as serious, but none the less failed, attempts to account for the virtue of humility without presupposing the religious assumptions that underpin it. They are attempts to ‘save’, so to speak, this virtue, and find a place for it in our ethical concepts. Their failure reinforces Taylor’s view: humility is intelligible as a virtue only within religion. Beyond religion, the Aristotelian *megalopsychia* or Nietzsche’s *Superman*, both rejecting humility, seem much more attractive ideals.

III

What now? Is this the end of humility? Well, yes and no: yes, if one means by that a virtue consisting of a certain kind of (low) self-assessment; and no, if one means a disposition towards a certain kind of

³³ See note 19 above.

³⁴ See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. by Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), section 267: ‘The Chinese have a proverb that mothers even teach children : *siao-sin* – “make your heart *small!*”’. This is the characteristic fundamental propensity in late civilizations: I do not doubt that an ancient Greek would recognize in us Europeans of today, too, such self-diminution; this alone would suffice for us to ‘offend his taste’.

³⁵ See also A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), Chapter 14, esp. p. 182.

behaviour. This last interpretation of humility was rejected at the beginning of my paper as incompatible with the intuition that humility is primarily and essentially a certain self-regarding attitude. However, in view of the difficulties in accounting for this intuition (without presupposing a religious background), it seems we have no choice but to get back to some kind of a behavioural account of humility. This new concept will naturally contradict some intuitions we have with regard to humility, but, I hope, it will accord successfully with others.

Driver says that, according to the behavioural account of modesty, 'modesty is equated with some sort of behaviour, such as the careful avoidance of boastfulness' (p. 375). Though Driver agrees that modesty expresses itself in certain patterns of behaviour, she believes that modest behaviour 'should not be *equated* with modesty' (p. 378). However, that could be granted without assuming that modesty is a kind of self-assessment. Modesty can be seen as a certain *disposition of the character*, a disposition to avoid certain immoral kinds of behaviour. Assuming, as I explained above, that modesty is especially praiseworthy in meritorious people, in those who are truly worthy, and in view of the conclusions of the last section, a fuller picture of this account can now be sketched.

Some people are better than others with respect to their talents and accomplishments and thus can, and should, be proud of themselves. Pride, says Richard Taylor:

is the justified love for oneself . . . Genuinely proud people perceive themselves as better than others, and their pride is justified because their perception is correct. Thus they love themselves, not as children and ordinary people do, for these do not possess the kind of worth that justifies such self-assessment, but because they really are, in the classical sense of the term, good.³⁶

This justified pride constitutes a permanent temptation to immoral kinds of behaviour. First, one who is genuinely worthy, and who knows it, is inclined to show off and to behave arrogantly and boastfully. Such behaviour is morally wrong since it tends to degrade the listener or the observer, making him feel low and inferior. Though, *ex hypothesi*, if the arrogant person is extraordinarily worthy, the observer might indeed be, in important respects, inferior to him, it certainly does not follow that his inferiority should be brought to his consciousness by such behaviour. Surely the fact that one is epistemically justified in believing

³⁶ *Ethics, Faith and Reason*, p. 100.

one is of high merit does not imply that one is morally justified in going around and showing off in front of other people thereby making them feel degraded and, at times, dehumanized. In addition to the intrinsic wrongness of causing such feelings of inferiority, they normally arouse other morally undesirable feelings: envy, even hatred, on the one hand, and feelings of frustration and despair, on the other.³⁷

Second, pride which results from the true superiority of the agent can easily lead the agent to think – *mistakenly* – that he is superior in his moral status too. He might think that since he is so worthy in comparison to the masses, he does not belong to the same moral community as they do, and is not subject to the same restricting moral rules. This adverse inference has been drawn more than once in the course of human history.³⁸

Thus, modesty is the virtue of being disposed to resist the above temptations. It is a disposition to avoid arrogance and boastfulness in spite of one's (justified) high self-assessment, and to be careful not to interpret one's (true) superiority as granting one extra, more permissive, moral rights. The modest person indeed keeps his qualities 'in perspective', not in the sense of believing they are not anything special, but rather in keeping a clear distinction between his superior qualities and achievements, on the one hand, and his moral status with regard to other human beings, on the other. He does not let his high self-assessment grow out of perspective and set foot in the realm of moral relations. Thus maybe the term 'behavioural account' for the view presented here is not very successful. The modest person not only *behaves* in a certain way, but also holds certain beliefs and attitudes that are at the basis of and encourage this behaviour.

This last point helps to show that modesty has a cognitive as well as an ethical aspect. The cognitive aspect is the (true) belief in the ultimate equality of human beings as 'ends in themselves', or, to put it more concretely, in their having the same moral rights. The ethical aspect is the disposition to stick, so to speak, to this belief and to behave accordingly, in spite of a very powerful temptation to believe and to behave contrarily. The cognitive condition should be interpreted

³⁷ On the harmful results of exaggerated self-praise, see Hume, 'Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals', p. 242: 'Were the door opened to self-praise . . . I say, every one is sensible that such a flood of impertinence would break upon us, as would render society wholly intolerable.'

³⁸ Since these undesirable results of immodest behaviour are less likely to threaten one's close friends and family, modesty is indeed less valuable as a virtue in these contexts. And whereas concealing from one's neighbours the fact that one is a professor might be regarded as a sign of modesty, such concealment would be ridiculous in an academic conference. See Hume, *ibid.*, p. 242, and Ben-Ze'ev, 'The Virtue of Modesty', Section 3.

weakly, as requiring just a general recognition – vague as it may be – of one's moral duty towards one's fellow beings. The importance of this condition is in ensuring that the morally right behaviour of the modest person is not accidental, that is, based on various non-moral and contingent reasons, but rather morally motivated and thus 'necessary'. The modest person respects other people not just out of politeness or out of a desire to *appear* as modest, but because he sincerely believes he ought to do so. And such behaviour is praiseworthy since, assuming this person is exceptionally superior, he has a strong temptation to believe the contrary, or not to follow consistently what this belief demands of him in actual life.

Robert Roberts has suggested that we distinguish two groups of virtues: motivational or substantial virtues, such as compassion, generosity and friendship; and virtues of will-power, such as courage, self-control and patience. Whereas the former are themselves moral motives, the latter are not:

A person can feed the poor out of compassion . . . and perform sacrifices out of friendship. But actions exhibiting courage and self-control are not done *out of* courage and self-control. Actions done out of moral motives may, however, be done *in virtue of* courage and self-control and patience, if the circumstances, psychological and environmental, demand such virtues.³⁹

What kind of virtue, then, is modesty? In the light of my previous comments, it seems to fit more naturally the category of will-power virtues than that of motivational virtues. As with the virtue of patience, one does not do certain actions *out of*, but rather *in virtue of*, modesty. One's being modest helps one to overcome inclinations that threaten to pull one away from carrying out one's moral obligations or exercising one's (substantial) moral virtues. The modest person manages to treat other human beings in the way he should, and indeed wants to, treat them, that is, out of compassion, justice, etc., in spite of his strong inclination to treat them otherwise, disregarding their moral status as human beings.⁴⁰

³⁹ Robert C. Roberts, 'Will Power and the Virtues', in R. Kruschwitz and R. Roberts, *The Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1987), p. 123.

⁴⁰ It might be interesting to compare the virtue of modesty as analysed here with that of tolerance, at least in one of its interpretations. Typically one is tolerant, argues Joseph Raz, 'if and only if he suppresses a desire to cause to another a harm or hurt which he thinks the other deserves' (*The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 401). So both modesty and tolerance are dispositions to resist tempting but harmful ways of behaviour. The difference is that while the modest person does not view this causing of

Note that in my view the above temptation to immoral kinds of behaviour is especially strong and hard to resist, precisely because the pride might be *justified*. That is why to overcome it is so admirable. In contrast, according to Richards and Flanagan, pride can never really be justified. If one has a high opinion of oneself, one just has to reflect and keep things in perspective in order for one to see that *sub specie aeternitatis* (see Flanagan, p. 425), one's accomplishments are not as important as one would like to think they are. It is, of course, harder to avoid showing off when one has much to show, than when one has nothing special to show anyhow. It therefore follows on the notion of modesty proposed here, that modesty has its full value as a virtue when it appears in excellent, in genuinely admirable people. The less excellent a person is and the less impressive his achievements, the harder it is – conceptually harder – to ascribe the virtue of modesty to him.⁴¹ This means that modesty – like many other virtues – admits of degrees, which seem to depend on two factors: first, on what one has to be modest *about*, that is, the degree of one's excellence; and second, the degree of one's modest behaviour, that is, of one's sensitivity to not hurting or degrading other (less excellent) human beings.

Contrary, then, to a very prevalent view about modesty, formulated as proposition (1) at the beginning of the paper, that the modest person must hold a low opinion of himself is in my view false. Moreover, he must *not* have such an opinion of himself; such an opinion would be either correct, in which case there would be nothing to be modest about, or incorrect, in which case the person's merit would be diminished as he would be ignorant of his real worth. This conclusion might seem paradoxical, but I hope I have managed to persuade the reader of its logic and its preferability over competing accounts of modesty.

In the light of these considerations, the following necessary conditions for a person P being modest (in the full sense of the term) seem to emerge:

1. P is genuinely admirable and, in many respects, is far above most other human beings.

harm or hurt as legitimate, in tolerance, 'the intolerant inclination is, in itself, at least in the eyes of the person experiencing it, worthwhile or desirable' (Raz, p. 403).

⁴¹ This helps to explain the odd, and, in a sense, self-defeating character of the claim 'I am modest' (see Driver, 'The Virtues of Ignorance', pp. 375–8; Flanagan, 'Virtue and Ignorance', p. 423). Since this claim presupposes the excellent nature of the speaker, it is tantamount to saying – 'I am excellent, but nevertheless I am modest about it'. But such a saying is hardly consistent with the truly modest person's inclination to *conceal* his excellence from others and not to show off.

2. P knows (1).
3. In spite of (2), P has the proper respect for other human beings and has a firm disposition to behave in accordance with this moral respect.

We can now sum up the advantages of our account over the ones discussed in Section I. First, there is no ignorance or self-deception involved in modesty, as the modest person knows accurately what he is worth. Second, consequently, there is nothing necessarily involuntary about the virtue of modesty, as was assumed by Driver. Just as with other dispositions, one can train oneself and others to gain this virtue, one can educate oneself and others to modest reactions and behaviour. Third, regarding the problem I raised about (IRF), a realistic high self-assessment is compatible with modesty, since modesty concerns one's moral attitude and behaviour towards others, and does not presuppose a low self-estimate.

In ending this analysis, it is worthwhile to comment on the relation that now obtains between modesty and pride. Traditionally, these concepts have been considered contraries, since both were interpreted as modes of self-assessment – low and high, respectively. With such an interpretation it is obvious why modesty and pride are necessarily incompatible. In my interpretation, however, no such necessary incompatibility exists,⁴² since the modest person too has a high opinion of himself. Pride, as Richard Taylor says, is a 'justified love for oneself', and surely the excellent person has justification for such love. Modesty concerns the implications of this self-love for the person's attitude and behaviour towards other people, in particular those who are not as worthy as he is. Hence, in the account developed here, there is nothing necessarily incoherent in the claim that one can be both proud and modest.⁴³ Admittedly, in a different use of pride which makes it close to arrogance, pride and modesty do exclude each other; one cannot behave proudly, in the sense of not paying the respect due to other human beings, while at the same time behaving modestly in the sense explicated above.⁴⁴

⁴² See also Ben-Ze'ev, 'The Virtues of Modesty', Section 8.

⁴³ The compatibility of pride and modesty clearly holds for a different sense of pride, i.e. pride in the sense of self-respect ('I have pride, so despite the price I might have to pay, I shall not let him humiliate me'), which is compatible with both a low and a high self-assessment. On this meaning of pride see G. Taylor, *Pride, Shame and Guilt*, p. 51, and David Sachs, 'How to Distinguish Self-Respect from Self-Esteem', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1981), p. 350.

⁴⁴ With this last sense of pride in mind, Nancy Show argues in her 'Compassion'

The account I have offered in this section might still seem problematic to some readers in so far as it presumes to be an account of *modesty*. Modesty, it might be argued, is incompatible with a high opinion of oneself, independently of the way one behaves towards other people and of the way one views one's moral status. There is, no doubt, a point in this criticism and I myself elaborated on it at the beginning of the paper. Other readers, however, might find this account plausible since it does keep some central elements of the traditional conception of modesty.⁴⁵ In any case, if our critical discussion in the first two sections is well established, namely, modesty cannot be interpreted as a low self-assessment, then it seems we face two options: either to join Nietzsche, Taylor and others and jettison the virtue of modesty altogether; or to keep it in our list of virtues through the kind of interpretation I have proposed in this last part of the essay. With all modesty, I leave the choice to the reader.⁴⁶

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(*American Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1991), pp. 195–205), that pride and arrogance bring people sometimes not to feel compassion for others' misfortune even when such compassion is rational (p. 200). What is essential to these and other undesirable characteristics is 'a morally objectionable obliviousness to others' (p. 205, note 8).

⁴⁵ The behavioural account seems to suit the concept of modesty better than that of humility. Modesty has an external domain (e.g. a modest manner of dressing) which humility lacks. This is why humility connotes more naturally some kind of (low) self-consciousness and not merely a mode of behaviour.

⁴⁶ I wish to thank Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, Charlotte Katzoff, David Widerker, and an anonymous reader of *The Philosophical Quarterly* for helpful comments on earlier drafts. I also wish to thank Aaron Ben-Ze'ev for giving me a copy of his forthcoming essay 'The Virtue of Modesty'.